

Viewpoint

Leadership and the Learning Organization

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When the editor of *Prism* asked me to contribute to this issue, the first thing that crossed my mind was: „Gosh! The world sure doesn't need another article on leadership.“ As a student of the subject for the past 20 years and a creator of a renowned seminar on leadership for senior executives, my files were full of articles on the subject. In one issue of one of the better magazines I receive, I counted more than 20 prescriptions for leadership in only the first few pages. In those pages I was instructed to:

- Build a new relationship with subordinates
- Become a „servant leader“
- Level with people about problems, changes, hopes, fears, and prospects
- Hold informal gab sessions
- Search for each follower's consuming interest, dream, or vision
- Treat leadership as a profession
- Rate myself and others objectively
- Initiate change
- Manage people's expectations
- Be a good teacher
- Reward accomplishment
- Put people first
- Do what I say

In the remaining pages of that magazine there may have been 150 or more prescriptions for leadership, and they were all good suggestions.

In reviewing the field, it's clear to me that the business community today is more sensitive to the subject of leadership than we were 20 years ago. It is also clear that the dramatic increase in writing on the subject has not produced a corresponding increase in leaders or made existing leaders much more effective. Why?

I think our basic notion of leadership is flawed in some serious ways.

- First, we think that leadership is something that is *done*. To be sure, leaders do things. But what makes them leaders is not what they do nearly so much as who they are.
- Second, we view leadership as an individual phenomenon. We study the great leaders as individuals. From these studies we believe we glean an understanding about what made *them* great. In so doing, we completely ignore the intimate and reciprocal relationship between leader and follower.
- Third, we assume that there is one kind of leadership, one universal set of principles to be discovered that governs all leadership in all cases. Instead, there are many types of leadership, all valid.

If my first and third observations are correct, then the act of reading this article won't make you any more a leader than you already are. At best, it may contribute to your thinking about what leadership means to you. But the good news is that the great leaders I have admired don't show much evidence of worrying about whether or not they are leaders. The same is true for the more than 5,000 executives who have participated in our Leadership & Mastery Seminar at Innovation Associates over the past 15 years.

In my experience, the real leaders in the world don't spend much time studying what makes for good leadership. Instead, they focus directly on excelling at their chosen games and at those things that will „raise their level of play“ in those games. In this they are like world-class professionals in any field: sports, performing arts, or whatever. The artist or athlete who leads his or her field has an entirely different relationship with the art or the sport than does the newspaper reviewer or sports commentator. The leader is consumed with his or her profession: the commentator or reviewer sits on the sidelines describing that profession. (Of course, the latter may be leaders in their own right, among other commentators and reviewers.)

Leadership as a State of Being

Leaders stand for something. They have created or found something in life that truly matters to them – something that they naturally take a stand for. We have been led to think that leadership is some sort of set of behaviors that we can acquire, some set of skills that can be taught. We've learned how to budget, how to give a good performance review, how to give a good presentation, etc. Now it's time in our career, we're told, to become a leader. We head down the hall to our local personnel officer and ask for the best course on leadership he or she has to offer. But herein lies a big trap. We buy into the notion that leadership is something outside ourselves that can be acquired, and so we begin to seek outside ourselves, which is exactly the wrong place! While there are skills of leadership, those skills don't *make* a leader.

Moreover, you don't become a leader by being given an organizational assignment: assume leadership. *Leadership arises from a commitment to achieving a result that truly matters to you.* If your vision requires the help and support of others, then in all likelihood you will be seen as a leader. My working definition of leadership is simply this: Leadership is what the rest of us call it when we see someone doing something they love and we want to help. This principle can be difficult for those of us in modern organizations, because we have never been expected to care deeply about what we're doing. In fact, historically, emotional involvement in work was discouraged and sanctioned against.

Nevertheless, I believe it to be the truest statement that I can make on the subject. We must learn how to bring our hearts to our daily work.

One of my most recent illustrations of leadership is an executive I know who was invited to a black-tie dinner in another city. Instead of taking her husband as escort, she took her 11-year-old son. I can only begin to describe how this simple act affected senior executives in a client firm with whom she was in the early stages of establishing a relationship. They were deeply moved with admiration and respect. In the words of one: „Her choice spoke volumes about who she was as a person and the organization that would promote her to a senior position.“ I think I can safely say that behavior would never be found in the most thorough survey of prescriptions for leadership. True leadership comes from who the person is – from his or her character.

Leadership as Relationship

The relationship between leader and follower is intimate. To study the leader in isolation is misleading. Leaders make leaders, followers make leaders, the times make leaders. All are important. As Robert Frost puts it, „How hard it is to keep from being King when it's in you and in the situation.“

The prevailing view in North America is that the individual makes himself or herself a leader. I think it's more accurate to say that leadership happens when someone takes a stand in favor of a desired future that other people also desire, either actively or latently. While the act of taking this stand is resolute, essentially individual, and often quite solitary, leadership also has a collective and adaptive quality in that it provokes people to project their hopes and aspirations into a changing reality. In other words, leadership arises when a person has the vision to see beyond present circumstances to a more desirable future, and other people are drawn into relationships with that person and his or her vision.

And leaders care not only about their vision, but about all the other people who support and follow it. From that caring, a true relationship and bond is formed. And from the relationship emerges a conversation.

Leadership as a Conversation

If leadership is not primarily a set of skills and behaviors, what is it? How about this: leadership is a conversation about truly important things between people who come to care about those things. As my colleague Eliot Daley says: Leaders give people permission to „care out loud.“ We study what great leaders said, because *what* they said is important and the fact that they said something is important. But what their followers said in return is equally important. And so is what those followers said *to each other* in response to the leader's statements. Perhaps the most important conversation is the one that is subsequently stimulated among followers when the leader is not there at all (although the subsequent discussion may still have been framed by him or her). Said another way, the challenge and work of leadership is to engage people in conversations that they want to have about what matters to them, thus enabling them to evoke, affirm, and align their caring.

The conversation within such an action-oriented community focuses on questions such as these: What do we most care about and want in our lives – what possibilities do our lives hold? Where do we stand right now – can we be both curious and honest about it? What is the *work* needed to get from here to there? What is our individual level of commitment to accomplishing the work? What are we each called upon to do? What's it going to be like for us along the way?

To be sure, the answers to these questions are important, but even more important is that the questions keep getting asked. This is one of those times when the most valuable thing is a really good question.

These questions are not just feel-good chatter. The essential nature of the conversation is that it develops individual and collective commitment. People are provoked to take their own stand in favor of what they care about. Their individual desires and commitment are flushed out and witnessed by the community. People discover what they are going to *do* to actualize their personal visions.

Leadership in a Learning Organization

In Chapter 18 of *The Fifth Discipline*,¹ my colleague Peter Senge writes of „The Leader’s New Work“ and speaks about the Leader as Designer. He points out that often the most neglected aspect of leadership is design. What good is it to inspire and align people’s deepest creative energy, only to place them in organizational settings that have them working at cross purposes? Leaders in a learning organization must be deeply involved in designing systems and structures that promote the easy and efficient translation of human creative energy into collective results. Beyond this, if you are to lead a learning organization (or team), you must see to it that there are conscious and deliberate efforts to build both the obvious and the subtle infrastructures that promote the development, retention, and sharing of knowledge capital. (This subject is discussed elsewhere in this issue of *Prism*.)

That same chapter also looks at the Leader as Steward and Teacher. Here our metaphor of conversation is particularly useful. A conversation that develops collective intelligence and creativity is important to every organization to some degree. It is especially important to a Learning Organization.

This metaphor of leadership as a conversation provides an interesting window from which to view leadership in a learning organization. Simply put, it is part of the leader’s job to structure and conduct an ongoing dialogue that raises the organization’s collective intelligence, commitment, and creativity. These qualities are central differentiators of the fully mature learning organization. In this setting the questions mentioned earlier become exceedingly important. Conversations about what we most care about, where we are now, and what work we need to do to get from here to there generate a real collective commitment within an organization and establish the creative tension that enables breakthrough creativity.²

In addition to these questions, dialogue in a learning organization focuses on the nature of the organization’s collective thinking, because this arena generally offers the highest leverage in developing collective intelligence. The data that we observe, whether personally or organizationally, is selected, filtered, and interpreted through our assumptions and beliefs. To a great degree we „see what we believe“ and are unable to perceive data that lies outside our existing mental models. Our current way of thinking, whether it be personal or collective, governs our perception of reality and thus holds great influence in our ability to create what we desire.

So, what kind of conversation would it take to cause us to think more clearly and more accurately? Unfortunately, thinking about thinking is particularly difficult, rather like the eye trying to see itself. And if that weren’t enough, it’s also threatening for people to expose their thinking, whether to themselves or others, because often we discover that it is flawed. This is embarrassing enough, but it is compounded when people’s identities are wrapped up in their perceptions of how intelligent they are. So, the territory for the conversation is both treacherous and tender. Nevertheless, it’s a conversation that must be joined.

Once again, the path is through questions – primarily two. The first has to do with getting to the actual observed data. This question is some form of, „What do we actually observe in reality?“ The question has clearly been employed historically by managers, but rarely answered with real rigor and honesty. In most every case, instead of getting observed facts, what we end up discussing is our interpretations of our observations and our conclusions, rather than the observations themselves. These conclusions are almost always functions of our embedded mental models and assumptions more than they are of objective reality. What passes for a conversation in most organizations is not a conversation about facts, but a conversation about competing interpretations of the facts masquerading as a conversation about facts. So, here it is the job of a leader to encourage people to make the distinction between their observations and their interpretations of their observations.

The second question flows naturally from this: „What is the thinking that led you to the conclusions or interpretations you have made?“ The intent of this question is to elucidate and make explicit the underlying thinking process and mental models between the conversants, because exploring this substratum creates new intelligence. Of course, this is a particularly difficult question to ask in a helpful and constructive way, because it is all too easily seen as a threat and a setup (which in many cases it actually is). Here the leader must ask the question sincerely and be aware of his or her own motives. Do you really want to explore competing points of view with the intent of developing new awareness or intelligence? This is the central stance that the leader must take and maintain in this conversation – a stance that gently yet resolutely builds a spirit of sincere curiosity and forms the basis for a true learning process, whether it be personal or organizational. This stance, when embedded throughout an organization results in the development and enhancement of individual and collective intelligence.

Many Models of Leadership

I've been surprised, in the last few discussions I've had on leadership, by the strength of opinions people hold on the subject. Leadership is one of those subjects for which some people really want the one, right, and final insight or answer. Interestingly, however, many of the positions that seem to make sense in isolation are irreconcilable with other points of view that also appear honest and accurate. So my conclusion is that no one point of view can be universally right or wrong. Many different models of leadership can be right. Leadership differs in fundamental ways depending on the circumstances, the leader, and the followers. We may abandon the premise that there is some „grand unifying theory“ of leadership. Continue the search, yes, but not with the dogmatic attitude that we are going to find the one, ultimate truth about the matter.

The observation that there is no one right way can be unsettling to a person who is trying to become a leader by following a set of instructions. But you don't become a leader this way. Instead, leadership is a creative act: it evokes collective human creativity to bring into existence something that was not there before. As Robert Fritz has observed, the fundamental nature of problem solving is to drive something (the problem) *out of* existence. The fundamental nature of creating is to bring something that is desired *into* existence.³ In the course of this creative activity, everyone associated develops the ability to create what matters most. Collective confidence builds, as does momentum. The organization or community begins to believe in itself and in its capacity to create the desired future. And this confidence becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, uplifting spirits and further fueling the community's actions.

Leaders emerge at all levels and in all places in an organization. If the accomplishment of what matters to you requires others' help, you'll be a leader. If you don't care deeply about what you're doing at work, then there's a good chance you won't be a leader (although if you're the boss, everyone will pretend you are).

Leadership is a consequence of commitment. You cannot commit your life spirit to something you don't care about. So find what you care about and do it.

¹ Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, Doubleday Currency, New York, 1990.

² Robert Fritz, *The Path of Least Resistance: Learning to Become the Creative Force in Your Own Life*, Fawcett Publishing, New York, 1989.

³ Robert Fritz, *Creating*, Fawcett Publishing, New York, 1991.

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